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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2984
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 5918
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5124
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 0981
RUEHCP/AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN PRIORITY 0013
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1595
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 9798
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 0924
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1667
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY 0765
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3230
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0556
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0259
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2785
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0435

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000254

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2016

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS MARACAIBO JAN. 26

REF: CARACAS 00217

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) Maracaibo, Venezuela's second largest city and a current political hotspot, was the destination for the Ambassador's most recent in-country outreach program on January 26. During his visit the Ambassador presented scholarships to nine indigenous students on behalf of the Venezuelan-American Center, participated in several press encounters, and presented trophies to the city's little league baseball champions. While all of these appointments were a success, meetings with the state's governor and highest-ranking anti-narcotics official were canceled after the two decided that the current political environment was too intense for an appearance with the Ambassador. While the two officials warned of Chavista-led protests, the Ambassador attended the two already scheduled events honoring US-sponsored social improvement projects. While no protests were reported, the concern by Governor Rosales confirms that Zulian politics is intensifying, and that Rosales is a real concern for the BRV. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On January 26, the Ambassador traveled to Maracaibo in the state of Zulia, a place known for its political independence and still-significant oil reserves. During his visit the Ambassador participated in two ceremonies honoring US-sponsored social improvement projects as well as several press encounters. The initial trip schedule had included meetings with Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales, as well as the state's highest-ranking anti-narcotics official, Jose Alberto Sanchez Montiel (Note: Rosales is one of only two opposition party governors in Venezuela. End note.) These appointments were abruptly canceled on the eve of the Ambassador's departure, as both officials contacted the Embassy and asked that the trip be postponed by a few weeks, citing the intense political situation and likelihood of Chavista-led protests

on that day. Both stated that the protests were not planned to coincide with the Ambassador's trip. Rather, they were to be directed at Governor Rosales, who has been battling accusations by a Chavista mayor that he traveled to Colombia to meet with Colombian military officials and exiled Venezuelans planning a coup against the Chavez regime (reftel). Rosales denies these accusations. After considering the new information, the Ambassador deferred to their wishes and did not meet with these officials, but proceeded to attend the events honoring two important, US-sponsored social improvement programs.

¶3. (U) The Ambassador's first stop was the Venezuelan-American Center (CEVAZ) where he presented nine indigenous students with scholarships to pay for English language study. The event was extremely well attended by CEVAZ members as well as the local press. The Ambassador began the event by briefly addressing the nine students and expressing how important it was to learn foreign languages. He then addressed the local media in a press conference format.

¶4. (SBU) Other press events during the day included a television interview with Globovision affiliate Telecolor, a radio interview with the Zulian affiliate of the national radio network CBN, and a meeting with the editorial board of Zulia's largest newspaper (and pro-Chavista publication) Panorama. While questions varied during the various events, reporters consistently asked him about the BRV accusations of US spying in Venezuela.

¶5. (U) The Ambassador's last event of the day took place at
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Zulia's little league baseball stadium. The little league baseball program in Zulia is a recipient of USAID funding, which was used to purchase new baseball equipment for the players. During the event, covered by local press, Ambassador Brownfield presented the championship trophies, watched the last inning of the game, and threw a few ceremonial pitches, notably throwing three strikes in a row.

Comment

¶6. (C) The Ambassador's trip to Zulia was a success with respect to the social improvement events and press encounters. It was unfortunate that the two other meetings had to be canceled. This was disappointing but not surprising as this government's attempts to discredit Rosales, a rumored presidential candidate, have been intensifying since the beginning of January and accusations of coup plotting, forgery, and political opportunism abound. It is not clear if the rumors of protest were designed to deter the Ambassador, but it wouldn't be the first time the Chavistas tried to derail Embassy activities. If nothing else, this trip confirmed that political tensions are rising in Zulia and that this state, known for its political independence, is becoming increasingly contentious in the run-up to December's presidential elections.
BROWNFIELD